

# CAN THE SCHOOL PREPARE FOR PARENTHOOD ?

By JOHN RUSSELL, M.A.

*(Headmaster of the Hampstead School of the King Alfred School Society)*

AT the suggestion of the Eugenics Education Society I have attempted to answer this question, but I write as a schoolmaster, not as a biologist. And I speak in my private capacity only.

The science of Eugenics may be shortly defined as "the study of the conditions under control which affect the quality of children at birth," and the art of Eugenics may be defined as "the steps by which the knowledge gained from that study may be turned to practical account in the interest of children yet unborn, and ideals yet unrealised."

The school does not specialise, and can, I think, do little more for the science than lead to some understanding of the place and power of science in human affairs. Can it do anything for the art ? Can it in any sense prepare for parenthood ? There is perhaps a preliminary question—is it desirable that it should so prepare ?

With the school lie the destinies of the future, and if we really desire the betterment of the race, and really believe in the physical basis of life, and therefore of betterment, there can be only one answer—it is desirable. Those only can say "No" who either are content with the prevailing wholesale happy-go-lucky propagation of fit and unfit, or else are afraid that the school, with its pervasive corporate life, will be unable to treat so intimate a matter with becoming delicacy, so think it safer to let sleeping dogs lie. As for the nothing-can-be-done philosophers, we can, I think, afford to ignore them.

Leaving, for the moment, these questions of delicacy and safety, in what does preparation for parenthood of good quality consist? The foundations of such preparation (in boy or girl) are the foundations of all life of good quality, and therefore the foundations of all education—which is not (as some seem to think) a mere preparation for life, but is also an actual living of life. Those foundations are (in the consecrated words)—a sound body, a sound mind, and a sound soul. Every least element of sound physical growth, of sound mental growth, and of sound spiritual growth, must ultimately contribute, if parenthood ever come, to the quality of that parenthood. And this will be true, even though the thought of subsequent parenthood never enter either the child's mind or the teacher's. And so the school, by merely doing its everyday trinity of duties by the child, is, however unconsciously, preparing indirectly for parenthood.

But it can, and should also, I hold, prepare directly: negatively, by not deliberately suppressing in the child's education (boy's or girl's) all reference to the sacred truths of sex; positively, by deliberately using those truths to establish a sense of fuller personal responsibility to the men and women to come—all of them the heirs, and for all time, of the best and worst of our own day. I say by not ignoring the truths of fatherhood and motherhood, I do not say by presenting them, because I hold that such presentation (to both boy and girl) can best be made by father and mother in the quite early years of life—as soon, that is, as the child begins to wonder about new lives.

The duty of the parent in the home is not my immediate theme, but I may be allowed one or two reflections.

Sex-troubles (so rife in every class of society) are largely the result of the dishonour in which sex-truths are generally held, of the ignorance which prevails of the whole truth, and of the irreverence with which the half truth is generally communicated. The quality of the nation (in body and soul) will never be what it might be till this irreverent dishonour gives way to reverent honour. That consummation can only be effected by the vigilant safeguarding of our children from all irreverence, and by a fearless honesty of statement in answer to their natural enquiries. Both safeguarding and truth-telling must begin in early childhood.

Before he is 10, a boy's imagination may be smirched for his whole life. He may afterwards become a good man, but there will always be a shadow on his happiness. Evil sex-communications of some sort are almost inevitable (with girls perhaps less than with boys) and it is the part of wisdom to anticipate them. With foundations well and truly laid in the home, the task of the school in respect of sex-knowledge will be much lightened. Indeed, in the absence of such foundations, the school (in the present state of public opinion) is almost powerless.

How children in the nursery are to be safeguarded from sex-irreverence parents will know as well as I. Exactly when and how they are to be led to the truth, the wisest of us cannot say. A good many helpful books have been written to guide us, but we must each of us go our own way. The love that has dared to look fearlessly upon life will have no difficulty in finding the moment and the words. Of all knowledge, of all truth, this is the most holy (although the most often treated unholily) and the lips of love and wisdom will utter it in a thousand different ways.

Returning now to the school—my proper theme—I am met by this doubt. Am I to say what I should think it best to do as a schoolmaster if I were quite free, or am I to say what, in the present state of parental (that is, public) opinion, I think it possible to do?

I have as yet actually done nothing—unless it be something to have long felt the significance of sex in education, and to have helped for several years in the purposeful school-mixing of boys and girls. But although I have no right to speak in any sense as a pioneer, I venture first to set forth an ideal—what I would do if I could have my heart's desire.

I should wish boys and girls to come to school (as I have said) with elementary sex-knowledge and unashamed—the knowledge that life and all it means is a joint gift from the bodies of fathers and mothers, and that just as children have received that gift from their parents, so some day it may be their privilege to confer it upon their children. And I should wish them to be as unashamed of this knowledge and of any respectful reference to it as of the knowledge that food feeds them and that sleep

restores. I should wish them further to be as ready—or as unready—to talk with their trusted teachers about such things as they are to talk—or be silent—about the deepest things of the soul.

Upon some such foundations I could, I think, usefully build. I should show my children incidentally in their nature-lessons how the law of fatherhood and motherhood is the law of everything we call life, and I should introduce them in the case of plants and animals to the principle, and some of the results, of selective parenthood. And so I should hope to lead them gradually to discover, almost for themselves, that the physical quality of the bodies with which men and women are born is not an accidental thing—an arbitrary so-called “act of God”—but is dependent upon the physical quality of their parents and of their parents’ parents.

And I should hope in the sociological (or applied science) lessons to lead them to the further conception that the mental and spiritual qualities which, on the one hand, have held the world so long in evil bondage, and, on the other, have broken so many chains, are also inherited qualities, and therefore under control—a control which, however slight and uncertain to-day, will steadily grow as knowledge grows.

They would then (I should hope) go out of school-life into world-life, with a foundation-sense of the significance in human affairs of human quality, and of our paramount duty to our own bodies, and further with a burning unquenchable faith in human progress, and a determination to take no part in the wanton propagation of evil in the spirit or in the flesh.

“Keep thy heart with all diligence,” runs my own school motto, “for out of it are the issues of life.” “Keep thy body also with all diligence,” I am sometimes tempted to add, “for out of it are issues of no less moment.”

That in general terms is what I think it would be wise to do, and what I think every proved schoolmaster and school-mistress should be not only free to do, but expected to do.

And yet in this grave matter, as in other grave matters, so timid and so divided is public opinion, that I have to be practically silent, “letting I dare not wait upon I would.”

Is that silence a cowardice and unwarrantable ? I think not. At its best it is formal respect for two unwritten laws—that the school must do no violence to the conscience of the home, and that sex is in the keeping of that conscience. At its worst it is mistaken deference. Those two unwritten laws will not, I am sure, always hold sway. And yet, if I were now to enter into discussion with the parents of my children, I should use all my powers to persuade them that the duty of laying foundations was theirs, rather than the school's, and not, at their peril, to be neglected. But even if they agreed to undertake it, public opinion would, I believe, make it almost impossible for me to go further.

What is this public opinion ? Who are the people who are afraid, and of what are they afraid ? Those who are afraid fall, as always, into two categories—the thinking and the unthinking. The unthinking, who live by a sort of instinctive imitation of their own *milieu* and an instinctive acquiescence in the prevailing modes of thought, are always afraid of anything really new and at all unconventional, and condemn, sometimes even with real moral fervour, without pausing to examine. Such people are a dead weight, and are not to be stirred in the mass. But here and there an individual will respond to stimulus, and that is all we can hope.

The thinking people who are afraid think chiefly, I imagine, three things : either that sex is an unfortunate attribute of humanity to which no reference may ever be made before marriage, and no overt reference after—in short, as Mr. Philip Wicksteed once wrote in fierce irony, “ an indiscretion, if not a positive impropriety, on the part of the Creator ” ; or that sex, however precious and dominating a factor in the life of the race, is so dangerous and masterful in the individual, that it is safer to keep it under lock and key till the latest possible moment ; or that self-consciousness of any sort in children is a bad, not a good, thing, and that just as there is a danger that much talk about health will turn them into premature valetudinarians, and much talk about conscience into hypocrites or prigs, so there is a danger that much talk about sex, even though inspired by the Eugenic ideal, will do harm rather than good.

To the thinkers (if really I ought to call them so) of the first category there is only one answer, which I borrow from Mr. Wicksteed: "The differentiation of the sexes," he says, "is often resented as an insult, and often treated as an indecent irrelevancy. But in this, as in other matters, it is the conduct and arguments of mankind that are indecent, insolent, and irrelevant, not the foundation laid by nature."

The lock and key argument would have more force (I cannot allow that it could ever have much) if any effective lock and key had ever been devised. But the truth—or rather a foul parody of the truth—will out, be your locks and keys what they may. And one of the strongest arguments for education in sex, as for education in all other elements of noble life, is just this—that the devil (to use the old phrase) is always busy and ready, and will fill the soul with his lies unless we can get our truth in before him. You tell me that by opening the eyes of my child to the holy mystery of sex, I am yielding the devil place! I answer in solemn seriousness that it is the only hope I have of keeping the devil at bay.

That the knowledge of good will always be an effective armour against evil I do not assert. I have even been told, and I have no difficulty in believing, that in one of our public schools an honourable attempt to teach the good did at the time seriously inflame certain tainted imaginations to evil; but that relative failure is only a further indication of the appalling failure of our hitherto accepted methods of culpable silence, and a further proof of the need for reform.

Think for a moment of the vile words that have been spoken in England by old and young since the present year began, of the vile thoughts thought, of the vile acts committed; think also of what is far worse, the tragic begetting of children, in ignorance, in recklessness, in disease, in riot, in brutality, in despair, and then dare to say: "We have done our best. Nothing more is possible. Meddling will only make bad worse."

Even if we could make a secret of this knowledge and lock it safely up, would it be wise? It is knowledge and the power to apply knowledge that distinguishes man from the beast. I admit of course that knowledge is of many sorts, and that there are

some sorts that boys and girls, perhaps even men and women, are better without. But I should draw my own dividing line between nature's ways and some men's ways. What nature has ordained cannot in itself be evil, however much man may turn it to evil uses. Life is unliveable on any other terms. And so, in the faith that elemental knowledge of any sort is power, and upon a basis of perfect frankness,—the only possible basis in education—I would unfold little by little to the growing child all I knew of the marvellous ways of nature, and of man's increasing control of those ways. If I secretly kept anything back, I should be afraid that when the fraud was discovered, confidence would be shaken in everything. And if I openly made reservations, I could hardly hope to lead my child to the reverent and whole-hearted trust in nature that is the foundation of all intelligent effort.

Moreover, on a still higher plane, whatever our view may be of the ultimate purpose of human life, we cannot ignore the fact that one great part of the purpose is the production of new life. Now that fact, and all its tremendous issues, cannot be driven home, can scarcely even be stated intelligibly, till the knowledge for which I am contending has been given.

And yet that fact and those issues affect more profoundly than perhaps any other fact or any other issues, not only the lives of the living generation, but the lives of all the generations yet to come.

My third category of doubters were those who, while not wishing to keep sex under lock and key, are afraid that Eugenists, like other enthusiasts, may run their enthusiasm a little too hard. Of course it will be possible to go too far, as it has been possible to go not far enough. And of course proportion must be kept. But if we can agree that something should be done, may we not also agree that the "how much" can only be left, as so often, to the wisdom of the individual teacher. First find your wise teachers. Then trust them.

The school is holy ground. It aims at nothing short of the good life—personal good life, national good life. But it is not always saying so—is not always beating the big morality drum. I never myself hesitate to beat the drum, when the occasion seems to demand it, but for the most part I keep it out of sight.

And so with this question of sex, and the relation of the sexes—for that is what it really comes to. Boys and girls must begin to understand while they are yet boys and girls—or they will never really understand as men and women—that the thing that matters most in the world is how we behave to one another, whether as human being to human being, man to woman, or woman to man. In the relation of human to human there is (or should be) no question of sex. In the relation of man to woman it is the determining factor—for it is the foundation of the noblest (as of the basest) human intimacies, and the source, not only of fatherhood and motherhood, but of the weal and woe of the world.

This great truth need not forever be in the mouth, but it must come to be felt by our boys and girls of all classes, and not as a truth only but as an inspiration. It must be taught everywhere with the earnestness of a religion—in the immediate interest of cleaner minds and personal chastity, but above all in the ultimate interest of happier marriages and healthier children. I admit the apparent greater difficulty of dealing with children from some of the dens we call homes. But the more sick these children are, the more they need a physician. We do not hesitate, in spite of their homes, to prescribe for their other weaknesses other ideals. Why should we hesitate to prescribe this ideal for this weakness? Peradventure one or two may be saved, and, for the rest, can they really be harmed? “Let well alone,” may sometimes be sound policy, but I have no patience with “let *ill* alone.” The least those who disagree with me can do is to suggest some positive alternative.

I have only to add that, ardently as I desire a good heredity and good conditions of birth, the schoolmaster in me attaches at least as much importance to a good environment and good conditions of growth.